

Fiction and reflective learning

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Adult educators are often concerned with fostering reflective learning amongst their students – but developing this capacity amongst people often poses multiple challenges (Brookfield, 1995). This paper explores the use of fiction, both in terms of reading and writing, as a way to potentially foster reflective learning. It begins with a brief discussion of adult education literature on reflective learning and then overviews some of the findings from two research studies that explore connections between lifelong learning and fiction. Drawing upon interviews from authors in these studies, some of the ways in which reflective learning may be connected to reading and writing fiction are taken up.

Role of reflective practice for learners and educators

Boden, Cook, Lasker-Scott, Moore and Shelton (2006) note that reflective practice may have long term beneficial effects, in that it allows adult learners to make connections between materials that they have learned in their courses and their actual work practices. Often reflective learning is talked about in an individualized context and entails reflecting back on one's own actions/thoughts and learning from these through activities such as personal journaling (Hyland-Russell, 2014). Schön (1987) notes that professionals often engage in reflective practice that may or may not always be conscious, as individuals attain greater skills connected with practical experience. Boud and Harvey (2012, 25) point out the value of reflective learning that may also occur at a group level, noting 'reflecting together on work issues generates considerable collective learning'.

Reflective learning is important not only for professional development and workplace learning, but also for personal growth and the development of active and engaged citizens. Adult education has a strong social purpose tradition that draws attention to the need for learners to become more conscious of the social, political, economic and cultural factors that shape their lives. Critical educators argue that learners must be able to evaluate alternative perspectives and strategies to enact social change. The capacity to be able to critically reflect upon learning experiences is important both for individual learners and learners in collective group or social contexts. Breuing (2011, 13) talks about how a critical pedagogical approach has often involved

developing a critical consciousness within a community of learners, versus developing this consciousness as part of an individual self-reflexive process, resulted in a critical consciousness that is socially constructed and reflects a multiplicity of diverse "voices." For Freire (1970), this critical consciousness or "conscientization", focuses on perceiving and exposing social and political contradictions and taking action against oppression.

One of the ways in which people may commonly gain skills connected to reflection is linked to their engagement with recreational types of reading such as fiction, or viewing popular culture through media such as television. A number of adult educators have noted the opportunities for learning related to television, such as Redmon, Wright and Sandlin (2009) in their article on public pedagogy and the Avengers series, Jubas and Knudson (2013) and their exploration of use of medical television and medical professionals, and Jarvis (2005) and her research on Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

Learning in connection to fiction is often done in informal contexts, i.e. book clubs located within the community. For example, DeNel Rehberg Soho (2006) looks at how media programs such as Canada Reads can influence adult learning experiences in connection to reading fiction. In the higher education context, fiction may also be used to foster learners' critical and reflective learning capacities. Crawley, Ditzel and Walton (2012) discuss how they use picture books in nursing education to encourage students to reflect upon communicating with patients around difficult issues such as death. Turner (2013) discusses how social work students may be encouraged to think more empathetically about potential clients by considering the circumstances of different characters or persons in narrative literature. Ultimately, there are many ways in which connections to fiction may enhance both personal and collective reflective learning experiences.

Research studies and findings

This paper draws upon two research studies funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) that look at connections between lifelong learning and fiction writing. Both studies involve interviews with over thirty fiction writers as well as interviews with a number of 'key informants' in policy, education, and program areas connected to fiction writing. While some of the authors included in these studies come from the United Kingdom and the United States, all of the participants cited in this particular paper are Canadian writers.

The analysis of findings has entailed careful review of the interview transcripts for thematic coding. In this paper, three subthemes are explored in connection to the general theme of reflective learning. These include a) learning to be reflective, b) individual reflection, and c) reflection, diversity, and social learning.

Learning to be reflective

An important part of learning to write fiction involves developing the capacity to be reflective. One aspect of this may be connected to the circumstances of an individual's background or lived experience, whereby factors conspire to create an environment that fosters reflexivity. An often underestimated factor may simply be having the time or mental space that fosters reflection. For example, when an individual experiences a significant amount of solitude, then she may find stimulation comes from internal rather than external sources.

One writer, Susanna Kearsley said:

I was sick a lot as a kid. I'm asthmatic and I was home sick with colds and flues for most of my childhood. I think when you spend a lot of time by yourself like that, it makes little pathways in your brain that makes story telling one of the things that

you do because you're lying there looking at the ceiling a lot of the time. Then I started learning about other writers like me: Robert Louis Stevenson and people that were only children, were off on their own, or were ill a lot. Whatever the reason, I think your brain is wired so that you watch and you notice things, maybe that other people don't notice.

In this case, Kearsley suggests that the mental space created by enforced physical inactivity or social isolation may lend some writers the opportunity to develop a mental attentiveness and opportunities for reflection that might not occur if a person is otherwise preoccupied with activities and socially engaged.

This sense of being set apart, in the role of the observer or outsider, is one that frequently came up in the interviews with writers. Author, Louise Penny, offers a similar kind of observation:

I always felt ... not because I was a girl or the middle child or anything, it was just part of who I was that I always felt kind of on the outside. And sitting on a lot of literary panels, I've noticed that that is a thread. It's not a constant, not everybody has felt like that. But a lot of authors, I think, have felt excluded, felt on the outside, felt a certain sense of personal isolation.

In his discussion of Herbert Marcuse, Brookfield (2005, 197) notes that this theorist's 'stress on the revolutionary power of detachment and isolation sits uneasily alongside the belief held by many adult educators that learning (particularly critical learning) is inherently social'. As the stories from these writers indicate, however, it may be that privacy and solitude can also foster reflective learning.

At the same, writers also talked about the importance of community in exchanging ideas and learning the craft. Nicole Markotic, who is poet and fiction writer as well as a creative writing professor explains:

I try to explain to my students now, if you can become a good critic, if you can tell what a story needs, then you become a better writer. I didn't understand that then. I think it is what you have to do as a literature critic and what you do as a teacher in critical courses, and what we do when we write about new novels or poetry by other people.

This type of critique can occur through individual assessment and reflection, but it can also be developed through collective learning experiences, such as in writing or literature classes. Both individual and social experiences, therefore, can enhance the development of reflective learning in relation to fiction writing.

Individual reflection

When writers talk about the process of learning to write, it may involve a great deal of personal reflection, since writing is often a somewhat individualistic experience, normally done in isolation. The craft of writing fiction involves a willingness to practice to develop one's personal skills and capabilities and writers may draw upon a variety of strategies to enhance their writing. Individual experience may shape the resources that writers draw upon to reflect upon their work. For example, writer, Andrew Borkowski, discussed the importance of his background knowledge as a

musician to enhance his ability to improve his writing. In describing this aspect of his creative writing, he explains that 'it's more of an internal process' whereby he will ask himself questions to discern the rhythm and pattern of the words such as:

Why does that sentence ring false to me? And how can I fix that? That's when I start to think of it in those sort of rhythmic terms, like is there one too many ideas in that sentence?

The types of questions that Borkowski asks himself demonstrate the kind of tacit knowledge or expertise that Shön (1983) talks about, similar to the way a professional athlete might reflect upon his game to consistently improve his performance.

The themes, topics, characters, and plots that shape the stories that fiction writers craft are often related in various ways to their own personal life experiences. In many instances fiction may be used as a catalyst for reflective learning on personal experience, as poet/author, Roy Miki, who lived through the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II explains:

I grew up in the shadow of the internment process. And that cataclysmic event for my family had a lasting effect on me as a writer and as a thinker...a lot of my writing stems from it, and in part it's the thing that motivated me to write. It's also a history that I've had to negotiate as a limit on my imagination. It has both allowed me to write and it has also challenged me to go beyond it.

As Miki so eloquently explains here, a challenge for fiction writers is to reflect and draw upon their life experiences to inform their writing, and yet at the same time, to also extend beyond that so it does not become a factor the limits or inhibits the work that they do.

Biographical experiences may thread their way through the stories crafted by writers, routed through the author's imagination, but interwoven with the process of reflection on issues that matter to the writer. When Louise Penny discussed her work with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation she shared this story:

We had a curling team with the station and we'd to go fun spiels all over northwestern Ontario and sit and talk with people. One of the most fun things I've ever done was sit in a tiny home way out in the middle of nowhere, drinking tea with this elderly man and woman. We sat in front of their woodstove in the middle of winter, and they were two of the kindest people I've ever met. And here I was, arrogant, big city girl, thinking I knew what was important in life, and it just struck me between the eyes that this is what's important in life – their small, modest home with their immense kindness. That's what matters. And that's what I learned in Thunder Bay: to value people and take them as they are, and that was a life lesson that goes beyond journalism and beyond any facts.

Readers who are familiar with Penny's crime fiction series will know that while her books delve into many of the dark shadows that haunt people's lives, a central theme that arises in her books is this focus on the importance of kindness.

Reflection, diversity, and social learning

In a world characterized by diversity, it is important for both educators and learners to develop an empathetic capacity to envision alternative ways of living and being in the world. Canadian children's author Sheree Fitch explains how fiction helped her to see this:

When I was thirteen, my dad made a point of giving me two books to read...one of them was *The Diary of Anne Frank* and the other was a book called *Black Like Me* which is a story of a man who was born blind and then gets to see. He sees the world and how much prejudice there is, so he disguises himself as a Black man...I think my dad wanted me to know that I was being raised in very, very White, middle-class Moncton, New Brunswick, and the world is very big.

Even across a country, particularly one as geographically and ethnically diverse as Canada, fiction reading and writing can help learners to reflect on both the difference and similarities that exist within their own nation. Author/poet Daphne Marlatt explains:

Writing is also a reflection on the culture you are part of, the culture you find yourself in; whether it's your family culture, your ethnic culture, community culture, or national culture. One of the things that really contributed to my sense of Canadian citizenship was the readings program of the Canada Council, because since I was a young writer, I have travelled [to give readings] to every territory and province in this country except Prince Edward Island.

Marlatt notes that this experience of engaging with readers in different parts of the country has shaped the way that she reflects upon her experience of citizenship in Canada.

As a former teacher (now a professor) who is also a children's author, Peter Cumming has worked and written about many different places in Canada. In reflecting upon the intersections of cultures that may impact upon learning, he shared his observations of living and working in the Canadian North:

With cultures in conflict we know some bad things can happen, but I was very interested in cultures in contact, in which there is hybridity. Each culture added to each other's culture without necessarily taking away anything from the other culture. So...when the whalers were there and the...Hudson Bay Boys were there...they became great card players. Cards are very portable. So Inuit women with the different colors of the seal fur and the seal skin kamiik [sealskin boots] have a design with spades, and hearts, and diamonds, and clubs, coming from the cards. From the whalers, the little accordion, the squeezebox and the square dancing that goes with it has become a part of Inuit culture. And similarly frozen porridge, the oatmeal came from the Scots—it turns out that it's great for making the runners of the qamutiik [sleds] slippery. So there are things that don't destroy one's culture, and similarly the Scots who lived there learned many things from the Inuit.

Cumming is not a naïve thinker. In his interview he noted that he saw first-hand some of the problems with violence and substance abuse endemic to Northern

Aboriginal communities that may be attributed partially to the legacy of the residential schools whereby Inuit children were taken away from their parents in a process that attempted cultural assimilation. Yet he also thinks that there is value in reflecting upon the forms of cultural interchange that can benefit or enrich communities.

Implications for adult education

Through studying learning in connection to fiction reading and writing, insights may be gained into understanding how to foster reflective practice in different contexts for adult educators and learners. At the individual level, we can see that fiction reading and writing provides opportunities for personal introspection. Our tendency, as Brookfield (2005) notes, to sometimes be dismissive of the need for quiet, internally focused thought as an integral component of critical adult learning, is challenged by thinking about the silent, independent work involved in reading or writing fiction. Similarly, McLean (2014) in his research on readers of self-help books, notes that the self-directed learning that occurs through these processes should not be overlooked or dismissed by adult educators.

At a social level, fiction reading and writing presents a multitude of possibilities for learning cross-culturally. Jarvis (2012, 749) notes that 'fiction's capacity to promote empathy can be presented as a stage in the development of critical reflection leading people to challenge entrenched social positions'. By connecting at an emotional as well as cognitive level with characters in a story, readers may become more open to diverse perspectives. Within various informal, non-formal, and formal learner contexts, adult educators may help to facilitate this process. Using critical pedagogical approaches as Breuing (2011) suggests may provide dialogical opportunities for collaborative reflective learning.

Writing fiction also provides the opportunity to situate yourself in someone else's position, albeit temporarily, and it challenges learners to expand their horizons, as author Roy Miki noted. Even the recognition that one's own personal experiences are both beneficial in providing background knowledge, yet a limitation in terms of understanding broader social and cultural perspectives, is an important first step in the reflective learning process. Ultimately, our research indicates that insights into the processes entailed in reflective learning are frequently evident when looking at learning in connection to fiction reading and writing.

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